

Testimony of
Kenneth Y. Tomlinson, Chairman
Broadcasting Board of Governors before the
Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and
International Relations
Committee on Government Reform
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Mr. Chairman, we greatly appreciate this Subcommittee's focus on public diplomacy in the Middle East, and we welcome the opportunity to tell you what the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) is doing in this critical and troubled region. I am joined at the hearing today by fellow board member Norman Pattiz, the father of Radio Sawa and an irrepressible force for international broadcasting.

In recent months and years, we have heard a great deal about public diplomacy from the think tanks and study groups and academia. They speak of "strategic direction" and "process" and "policy coordination." I submit that we should be focused on vision and leadership and action.

That is why, with the enthusiastic support of President Bush and key leaders in the Administration and Congress, the BBG will be launching later this week an Arabic-language satellite television service to the Middle East.

It is no accident that President Bush speaks of "open debate" and "truth" when he describes what this network will mean to the people of the Middle East. The network will be called Alhurra—Arabic for "the free one"—and there we will challenge the voices of hate and repression with truth and the voices of tolerance and moderation. The people will hear free and open discussions not just about conflict in the Middle East, but also about subjects critical to that region's future. We are talking about economic development and human rights and respect for minorities.

I wish I could take you this afternoon to Alhurra's broadcast complex in Northern Virginia where in little more than four months a building has been transformed into a state-of-the-art broadcast facility. The set-designs are magnificent—worthy of what the world would expect from the United States. But what is truly extraordinary is the sea of Middle Eastern faces—

newsmen and newswomen—enthusiastically preparing, midst working carpenters and electricians, to launch the network. I'm told that since October some 900,000 feet of cable has been installed in this facility. Some have said Alhurra will become the most significant development in international broadcasting since the launch of the Voice of America during World War II—and I believe that will be the case.

The Broadcasting Board of Governors has been in business for less than ten years. We were created by Members of Congress led by Delaware Senator Joe Biden who understood the role broadcasting played in our victory in the Cold War. Solidarity founder Lech Walesa once was asked if there was a relationship between Radio Free Europe and the fall of communism and the rise of free and democratic institutions in Poland. He replied, "Would there be an Earth without the sun?"

BBG's founders believed that a Board with Americans distinguished in the fields of communications, print and broadcast media, and foreign affairs, would bring the drive and innovation of the private sector to government. These founders also knew the credibility of our broadcasts would depend on this Board serving as a firewall protecting our government-paid journalists from the nation's foreign policy establishment.

As I said when the New York Times first reported about Alhurra: "The people aren't stupid. If we are slanting the news, they'll figure it out. If we establish long-term credibility, people will begin to turn to us with serious questions. What went wrong? What retarded a civilization that was once far ahead of the West? And we'll be there to answer them."

Our competitive edge in the Middle East is our very dedication to truth and free and open debate. And we will stand out like a beacon of light in a media market dominated by sensationalism and distortion.

That is what brought immediate success to the Voice of America's new Persian-language satellite television program "News and Views" to the people of Iran. Less than three months after that program was launched last summer, one independent survey showed "News and Views" was reaching a remarkable 12 percent of the country's over-18 population.

Typical of what creative broadcasting can do is the new segment launched by "News and Views" called "Your Voice." Iranian viewers were invited to

submit e-mails on the controversy surrounding the February 20th parliamentary elections—from the banning of candidates to calls for an election boycott. We opened a dialogue that is allowing Iranians to share their views with other Iranians—and the response has been extraordinary. Allow me to pay tribute to Blanquita Cullum who played such an important role in the creation of this service.

It is no accident that satellite television is the vehicle for our latest broadcast initiative. As Thomas Friedman has explained, satellite television is not just an important media phenomenon in the Middle East, it is also the most important political phenomenon. That is why we at the BBG believe that satellite television is to our future what shortwave radio was to our past.

My predecessors likewise brought innovation to our radio broadcasts that proved to be vital to the success of our Afghan Radio Network which broadcasts in Dari and Pashto and our youth-oriented Radio Farda to Iran and Radio Sawa to the Arab world. When Norm Pattiz was in the process of creating Radio Sawa, he traveled throughout the Middle East to negotiate heretofore unattainable agreements for American AM and FM transmitters in Middle Eastern countries so that we could be heard on the radios of choice in the region.

Radio Sawa has been a phenomenal success. A survey by ACNielsen research last fall demonstrated that Sawa has achieved market dominance—an average listenership of 42 percent in the important age group between 15 and 29—in key Middle Eastern countries.

Skeptics conceded Arabs might listen to our music but would never pay any attention to our news. Yet this same ACNielsen survey found that in a region where skepticism towards the U.S. is high and boycotts of U.S. products are common, Radio Sawa, clearly identified as a U.S. government broadcaster, was found to be a reliable source of news and information by 73 percent of its weekly listenership.

In a matter of months, Sawa built the largest radio news gathering operation in the Middle East presenting up-to-the minute news 24 hours a day and over 325 newscasts per week. It was the very reliability of our Sawa news that made us the leading source for news in Iraq even as we went to war there.

News also accounts for the surprising audience that ACNielsen documented for Sawa among older listeners in target countries in the Middle East—better than 20 percent among the general population over 30. Adults know the time of scheduled newscasts, and they tune in.

Mr. Chairman, I will submit for the record highlights of the ACNielsen survey as well as material from another independent survey documenting Sawa's success in Iraq.

Accurate news and serious content is the real success of Sawa. Under the leadership of Mouafac Harb, Sawa's outstanding News Director who will assume that post for Alhurra, the station also is the source of a host of shows that explore freedom and democracy. Typical of these: "The Free Zone," a 30-minute weekly review and discussion of democracy and freedom as they relate specifically to the Middle East; "Ask the World Now," where U.S. policy makers respond to questions from Middle East listeners, and "Sawa Chat," where reporters go to the streets of the Middle East with a question of the day.

The latest initiative we are planning is a new youth-oriented Urdu broadcast to Pakistan where listeners will be served contemporary Pakistani and western music along with news and current affairs features and subjects ranging from education to business to health. We hope this service, called Radio Aap ki Duniya [Your World Radio], will begin seven-day-a-week, 12 hours a day of AM broadcasting this spring, and we believe we will soon add FM affiliates in Pakistan.

Mr. Chairman, critical to this initiative is one of your constituents, Steve Simmons, a valued member of our board.

By spring, we also expect to have a 10-hour per day Iraqi stream for Middle East television that will be available through terrestrial transmitters.

Allow me to pause to pay tribute to Representative Frank Wolf who is the guiding force behind this initiative.

Cynics demand proof of the effectiveness of our broadcasting, and I say that is difficult to measure though the ACNielsen survey showed that Sawa's listeners had a more positive view of the United States than the general population. It is important to understand that the payoff for our investment

in international broadcasting will not be found in the short term, but in the long haul.

What we can give to the Middle East is the same gift that we gave to the former Soviet Union and the people of Eastern Europe during the Cold War—accurate information they need to compare their political, economic, and social system to those that exist successfully elsewhere in the world. If they can accurately assess their own leadership, if they can distinguish between the truth and the propaganda of our enemies, the people will have the tools that will lead to change.

Lessons from U.S. broadcasting during the Cold War also may be applied to what we hope to achieve in the Middle East. When that wall finally came down, populations in many of those countries in Eastern Europe were prepared for change in no small part because they had been informed about the outside world through international broadcasting. This we hope to do for the people of the Middle East.

Mr. Chairman, you asked that I address coordination among agencies that are responsible for explaining and advocating U.S. policies and values to foreign publics. As you know, the Secretary of State is an ex-officio member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, and the newly confirmed Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Margaret Tutwiler has already demonstrated a great deal of interest in our Board's work. Our diplomats overseas also have helped us gain valuable transmission resources in countries to which we broadcast. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has from time to time provided important financial support for broadcasts—support that was critical in our recent ability to expand our programming to Zimbabwe.

Let me also pay tribute to the White House Office of Global Communications under the leadership of Tucker Eskew and its new Director Mary Catherine Andrews. Their support has been critical to the development of a number of our initiatives—specifically Middle East television—and their coordination of the Administration's support for what we do has been essential to our success.

But as much as we value coordination, we also appreciate this Administration's dedication to the firewall that separates the short-term

policy objectives of the instruments of government and our responsibility to journalistic independence in order to achieve audience credibility.

We believe it is important to maintain the strength of public diplomacy—and the traditions of international broadcasting. I am convinced that we will not be successful in our overall mission of delivering our message to the world if we fail to grasp that these are two different spheres and that they operate according to two different sets of rules.

It is very important that government spokesmen take America's message to the world—passionately and relentlessly. We should not be ashamed of public advocacy on behalf of freedom and democracy and the United States of America.

International broadcasting on the other hand is called upon to reflect the highest standards of independent journalism as the best means of demonstrating to international audiences that truth is on the side of democratic values.

These arms of public diplomacy should be parallel pursuits because the effectiveness of either is adversely affected when one attempts to impose its approach on the other.

I remember 30 years ago when RFE/RL and VOA began broadcasting the Watergate hearings. Those broadcasts caused heartburn for many in Washington, but looking back we see they constituted a veritable civics lesson on the importance of separation of powers and rule of law. Over the years I have heard so many citizens of post-communist countries tell how those broadcasts helped them understand the real meaning of freedom and democracy.

We in America are fortunate that telling the truth works to our long-term advantage. That is why international broadcasting is so important to this country.

I would like to conclude with a word about our future. In the years between the end of the Cold War and 9/11, international broadcasting saw its budget reduced by 40 percent in real terms. Cuts in personnel followed numerically close behind. Today, less than three years after 9/11, with the Administration's and Congress's support for expanding broadcasting efforts

in the Middle East and Muslim nations, the BBG has established a record of success that is a sturdy foundation for future growth. This record points toward our Global Broadcasting Vision of 2010 that is currently a work in progress.

We must build on our achievements, and reach out to others in the world of Islam and beyond whose sources of information about the U.S. and democracy have misled them and continue to do so today. Again, the truth remains our constant guide. When others have the access to the facts for which the BBG stands, we believe that we will have made a material and lasting contribution to the security of the United States.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my formal statement, and I will be happy to answer any questions that your Subcommittee might have.